DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 098 CS 507 412

AUTHOR Neff, Bonita Dostal
TITLE Public Relations Accreditation in the Throes of Change: Academics Suggest New Directions for Program Accreditation.
PUB DATE 12 Apr 91
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central State Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 11-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accreditation (Institutions); *Accrediting Agencies; Educational Change; Higher Education; *Journalism Education; *Mass Media; National Surveys; *Public Relations
IDENTIFIERS Accrediting Council Educ Journalism Mass Commun; Curriculum Emphases; *Educational Issues; Public Relations Society of America

ABSTRACT

Public relations accreditation is granted by the national bodies of the Council of Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) and the Department of Education to the Accreditation Council for Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC). The privilege of accrediting public relations fell to a group in which journalism and mass communications were the primary departments developing public relations curriculum in the early years. More recently public relations programs have been rapidly developing in communication departments, while hostility between journalism and public relations has been intensifying. For the sake of survival, journalism departments have been holding on to public relations programs because of the need to retain student enrollment. As the credibility of accreditation grows, the pressure to be accredited has increased. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) responded to the interest in accreditation by establishing a certification program for public relations, a process which nearly duplicates the ACEJMC accreditation program. PRSA certification is tied to Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapters and PRSA credentials for advisors, a move unwanted by most academics. Academics resent PRSA, a strong practitioners' group, dictating in academic realms. To resolve the situation, several areas of research and networking need to be pursued. (Author/SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED331098

Public Relations Accreditation in the Throes of Change: Academics' Suggest New Directions for Program Accreditation

by

Bonita Dostal Neff, Ph.D.
Public Communication Associates
8320 Greenwood Avenue
Munster, Indiana 46321-1813
(219 838-4428)

Paper presented in the "Top Papers in Public Relations" panel
Central States Communication Association
60th Anniversary Conference
April 12, 1991
Chicago, Illinois

CS507412

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Bonita Dostal Neff

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Public Relations Accreditation in the Throes of Change:

Academics' Suggest New Directions for Program Accreditation

ABSTRACT

Public relations Accreditation is granted by the national bodies of COPA (Council of Postsecondary Accreditation) and DOE (Department of Education) to ACEJMC (Accreditation Council for Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication). The privilege of accrediting public relations fell to a group where journalism and mass communications were the primary departments developing public relations curriculum in the early years. More recently public relations programs have been rapidly developing in communication departments while hostility between journalism and public relations has been intensifying. For the sake of survival, journalism departments have been holding on to public relations programs because of the need to retain student enrollment.

As the credibility of accreditation grows, the pressure to be accredited has increased. PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) responded to the interest in accreditation by establishing a "certification" program for PR, a process which nearly duplicates the ACEJMC accreditation program. Although PRSA does not have the "unit rule" (only PR programs with journalism and mass communication programs can be accredited), certification is tied to PRSSA chapters and PRSA credentials for advisors. This is a move which is unwanted by most academics. Whereas ACEJMC is viewed as an academic group overseeing academic matters, PRSA is a strong practitioner's group and academics resent practitioner's dictating in academic realms. Plus the PRSA certification program is defunct at all land grant and state schools where COPA and DOE have an agreement that no accreditation program can compete with theirs.

Recommendations follow the status report. 1) COPA is being closely briefed on the status of PR in communication departments, 2) Name of ACEJMC should be changed since communication departments have been accredited and can apply.
3) The technical "unit rule" discriminates against communication departments and thus no longer represents the most effective professional preparation in public relations.

Public Relations Accreditation in the Throes of Change:

Academics' Suggest New Directions for Program Accreditation

Program accreditation for colleges and universities with public relations sequences, emphases, or majors is like the evolution from the horse to the car. Some academics are still riding the horse and others have moved on to the automobile. However, as always, when the old orientation is still controlling the decision making, change comes slowly and usually with controversy.

For many, public relations accreditation is on the threshold of major redefinition and reorientation. Like two ships passing in the dark, journalism academics and communication academics continue on their way with little acknowledgement from each other (See footnote).

The purpose of this article is to establish the status of public relations program accreditation in light of the views of academics working with public relations curriculum in departments of communication, journalism, and mass communication. Specifically this thrust will be accomplished through a discussion of three areas: 1) establishing who wants accreditation, 2) identifying the barriers to accreditation reform, and 3) suggesting specific recommendations for redirecting and reorienting program accreditation for public relations.

So Who Wants Program Accreditation for PR?

The statements of concern about accreditation surface in different ways. Journalism academics are struggling for survival and bemoan the fact that much of their enrollment is dependent on public relations majors. An area journalist's view is lacking the ethical rigor required in journalism. The relationship between public relations and journalism was described in the Chronicle of Higher Education in 1989 as being tense in departments. Furthermore, national accreditation is closely tied to journalism departments and these professionals control the criteria for standards through the sole national accrediting body--COPA (Council on Postsecondary Accreditation works closely with the Department of Education's accreditation unit).

Public relations in communication departments is growing so fast that the issue of accreditation is not receiving much attention. Other more pressing issues such as rapid course development, heavy student enrollment, and the dearth of academics for hire in public relations push accreditation away from forefront of concerns. Plus communication academics are

---

Academics in communication departments are so involved in building PR programs that accreditation issues are not of major concern at this point.

---

simply "new" to the game of accreditation in public relations and need much more background information.

Business departments rarely enter the dialogue on accreditation through ACEJMC (Accrediting Council for Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication). Business departments are accredited through another professional organization. Plus public relations is largely an undeveloped area of study for undergraduates in business departments. Seeking accreditation for public relations is a not an issue in business.

So to enter the dialogue on accreditation, you have one group of academics in control of a tightly designed accrediting process which is essentially an exclusionary process (unit rule). Then on the other hand, this same group is demanding proof of interest in accreditation from communication departments. The fact that the question is even asked by the Accreditation Council suggests the lack of openness towards groups other than those which are journalism oriented (ACEJMC Annual Meeting, Chicago, 1989).

Surveys Establish Interest in Accreditation for Communication Departments

Seeking data to open dialogue on access to accreditation, the Accreditation Task Force for the International Communication Association conducted two surveys. One 1987 survey by Peter Hamilton questioned ICA-PRIG (Public Relations Interest Group) members on their interest in accreditation. The second research effort, a national survey by Neff in 1990, sought feedback from academics in journalism, communication, and mass communication. The surveys were complimented by informal and official dialogue with the representatives of the two national coordinating accrediting agencies: COPA (The Council on Postsecondary Education) and DOE (Department of Education accreditation unit).

One of the key questions in a document given to the officers at the most recent national meeting of ACEJMC was: "who really is interested in accreditation in communication?" The implication being that no one has expressed interest before so why bother discussing this now. COPA, The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, reiterated again in the same document a lack of awareness about communication departments. COPA stated (in a response to the ICA-PRIG petition requesting access to the ACEJMC accreditation process): "in sum, who knows what about these departments (referring here to communication):

COPA is unaware of the growth of public relations programs in communication departments.

---

their general and specific organizational and curricular nature?" And in a final statements COPA summarizes: "In brief, I don't

know anybody who could answer this question without considerable research." (Marjorie Peace Lenn, Director Professional Services, COPA, September 11, 1989.)

The response to ACEJMC's request for information on communication departments was answered, in part, by two ICA-PRIG surveys. The Hamilton study with 30 completed surveys and the Neff study with 27 completed surveys were similar in response rate but had a varied population (PRIG members in 1987 study; second study included PR academics from PRIG, the Speech Communication Association and Central State Communication Association).

The Hamilton study "represents approximately 50 to 60 percent of the colleges and universities which have at least one faculty member holding PRIG membership." (Hamilton, page 1) The Neff survey completed by 27 respondents represents 16 communication departments, 4 journalism, 3 mass communication, 1 dean from School of Arts & Sciences, and 3 without specific affiliations. The first set of responses are from the 1987 study and the second set are from the 1990 survey. Note a number of respondents are already accredited by ACEJMC.

Q1. Is your PR program accredited by ACEJMC-ACEJMC?
Yes: 30.0% No: 70.0% 1987 Survey
Yes: 11.0% No: 81% 1990 Survey

Of those departments not accredited, most recently, there has been some attempt to attain accreditation and even more are less likely to say "NO" to the possibilities of accreditation.

Q2. If NO: Have you ever attempted to have your PR program accredited?
Yes: 00.0% No: 100.0%
Yes: 04.0% No: 63.0% NA: 07.0%

Q3. Are you panning to apply for ACEJMC accreditation in the future?
Yes: 30.0% No: 30.0% Not sure: 40.0%
Yes: 33.0% No: 44.4% Not sure: 11.0% Other: 04.0%*
*departmental accreditation only

The increase in the "YES" response to applying for accreditation in the future is underscored by a higher "NO" response to no future plans. The "NO" responses possibly indicated the better known reality of the "unit rule" which assures only journalism programs successfuly qualify. Remove the restrictions of a journalism curriculum and the YES response rate soars and the NO response virtually disappears.

Q5. Would you attempt to have your program certified by ACEJMC, if your program qualified?
Yes: 30.0% No: 13.3% Not sure: 40.0% NA: 16.7%
Yes: 56.0% No: 04.0% Not sure: 30.0% NA: 04.0%

Thus it is not so much the lack of interest as it is the impossible barriers to qualifying that are discouraging communication departments. Remove these restrictions and the interest in accreditation nearly doubles, an increase from 33.0% to 56.0%. One respondent clearly identifies the barrier as "but they only accredit those with journalism and mass communication programs, wherever they're housed." ACEJMC's "unit rule" biases public relations programs in favor of journalism departments. This occurs in spite of research and evidence indicating a journalism background does not prepare the student for the challenges of being a public relations professional today. Another intent of the unit rule is to keep public relations tied to journalism, a necessary forced relationship to keep journalism enrollment figures stable.

One attempt to modify the journalism model has emerged from the Public Relations Society of America. Although less cast in the journalism model, the curriculum model is closely tied to the standards from the 1987 Joint Commission study of AEJMC (Association of Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication) and PRSA (Public Relations Society of America). Although confusing at first, because accreditation becomes "certification," the certification languaging is quite important. DOE (Department of Education) stated that "certification" rather than "accreditation" had to be used to avoid being in legal conflict with national regulations from COPA and DOE. (Telephone conversation, DOE, 1989) For some, "certifying" a program seems to be a misnomer. Certification is usually identified with an individual's qualifications not program standards. Note that the PRSA "certification" process "essentially parallels that ACEJMC" and the differences are the following:

1. Costs are are lower with a shorter 3-day site visit.

2. Only those schools with PRSA-chartered student chapters are eligible during the 2-year trial period.

3. Only PRSA accredited members will be involved in the certification process. Site visit teams will include educators as well as practitioners.

4. A 7-year certification is granted, two years longer then ACEJMC's accreditation. (Neff, Public Relations Accreditation Proceedings, 1989.)

Since the PRSA certification process is very recent, few schools have been through the process. Both an ACEJMC accredited department and an ineligible department have applied. Obviously a great deal of frustration with the ACEJMC accreditation limitations has led to the push to develop an alternate system for departments with public relations programs. However, in comparing the two systems, the respondents reveal further major drawbacks that could outweigh any advantages to a new accrediting-certification program.

Barriers to Accreditation Reform

The respondent had both positive and negative criticisms of ACEJMC's accreditation process for both the 1987 and the 1990 years. In a content analysis of responses, the positive aspects for ACEJMC tended to be three: credibility, status, and monies. Credibility seemed to grow stronger in the 3 year interim, a 30.0% to 37.0% increase. Examples of credibility were considered to include the following statements:

justified program development on department level
state certification valued
program considered of professional caliber
credibility with professional groups and nonpublic relations
people seemed to be valued in liberal arts
suggested uniform standards

Status became focused on faculty and student improvements. Such characteristics as:

student recruitment easier
improves faculty
better salaries
student-teacher ratio improved
helps PRSSA chapters
more internship opportunities

A summary of the total number of responses (multiple responses possible) appears in the table below:

POSITIVE MENTIONS
(multiple responses possible)

Credibility	
1987	1990
11	8

Status	
1987	1990
11	8

Monies (Grants)	
1987	1990
5	3

The effect of the accreditation designation in giving Status, Credibility, and Attracting Monies declined by 1990. While the accreditation designation is not viewed by many as resulting in more monies or necessarily better faculty or students, or resulting in more support for curriculum development or more prestige with PR professionals and nonprofessionals, the 1990 population surveyed represented fewer ACEJMC programs.

The negative characteristic may, however, override the virtues from increased credibility. Especially with the organization of the current accreditation/certification systems and with ACEJMC's bias toward one discipline and PRSA

practitioner orientation. As outlined in the table below, the negative comments were plentiful. The idea that accreditation was a burden touched on the time and the duplication of teaching when accreditation guidelines are followed. Respondents mentioned the "lack of diversity," a characteristic which increased greatly in frequency of mention by 1990. The difficulty in making curriculum changes under accreditation/certification is another way of expressing the discontent with the program constraints proposed.

NEGATIVE RESPONSES
(multiple responses possible)

Dictates		Expensive	
1987	1990	1987	1990
2	1	2	0
Burden		**Changes Difficult**	
1987	1990	1987	1990
6	1	4	3
Ignore Diversity		**Don't Need Status**	
1987	1990	1987	1990
4	9	5	0

The lack of increased response for the negative categories of "expensive" and "burden" may reflect that the second sample had fewer ACEJMC accredited schools and the newer PRSA "certification" system cost less and involved a shorter site visit. Responses indicated that ACEJMC "dictates" to academia, "makes changes difficult", and many more responses indicted accreditation "ignores diversity." The PRSA certification question drew particularly sharp opposition when posed in the 1990 survey. Any support for PRSA's certification system was cast in vague comments such as "may be valuable." The specific question on PRSA accreditation in the 1990 survey read:

Q7.7 PRSA has instituted a "certification" procedure for PR academic programs. What is your perception of a certification program being offered by a profession of practitioners vs an accreditation program being offered by a nationally designated accreditation organization designated by COPA and DOE? The responses ranged over a variety of perspectives, for example:

	PRSA Comments	
	1987	1990
Not enough information	----	1
Too new to the game	----	1
Compliments ACEJMC	----	1
Infringes on Academic freedom	----	7
Too expensive	----	1
Very negative response	----	3
Requested review	----	1
May be valuable	----	1
Indifferent	----	1
Only COPA & DOE	2	2
No response	----	6

Whereas, in 1987 the only negative response was COPA & DOE were enough, by 1990 much stronger and more precise negative comments were given. The negative responses focused on the "certification" process not being professional and had stronger comments such as "it sucks, the largest barrier to professionalizing PR is the "old" PRSA practitioner!" One respondent simply said the concept was "subterfuge," a plan to evade something unpleasant. The strong response of "infringing on academic freedom" was most fully amplified on by the respondents statements. One respondent stated that the PRSSA certification should not "infringe on the theoretical issues the industry may be less interested in." Another described the PRSA certification as "confusing and potentially disastrous. Practitioners had input, now it is the job of academy to police itself and I am still a practitioner as well as Ph.D.." Other specific criticism indicated the battle lines are well defined on the PRSA accreditation program, for example:

> To be honest, we are 'certified' by PRSA, but with reluctance and only to retain our PRSSA chapter. We are particularly disturbed by constraint placed on other aspects of our major (e.g. only 30 hours 'allowed' in major, and have refused to comply based in principles of academic freedom. If pushed, we will give up our PRSSA chapter, rather than violate this principle of faculty autonomy over curricular matters.

One frustrated respondent echoed:

> PRSA intrusions into the Academy--with the demands for 'PR' in course names and for a PRSA member-advisor for PRSSA chapters have been sufficient. Suggest instead that academic departments start investigation and certifying the operations (for ethical practices, etc of APR holders). Get the point? We're academically accredited for academic work. Professionals are certified for their work. Cross the line one way, cross it the other.

Even more important than the negative responses to PRSA's certification system is the illegal status of the process. Obviously PRSA can never be called an accreditation system for programs. COPA and DOE designate only one body for national accreditation and presently that is ACEJMC. But an equally problematic situation is that COPA has agreements with state and land-grant colleges that only their accreditation/certification system is allowed on these campuses. This further depletes PRSA's certification system's effectiveness. In fact, the PRSA system could be considered more similar to the consulting program offered by the Speech Communication Association. Here academics volunteer to serve on review groups to evaluate a program or departments readiness for accreditation. This seems to be the level that the PRSA certification process has been reduced to.

And, yet, this may be a valuable service for a variety of schools.

Specific Recommendations for Redirecting and Reorienting Program Accreditation

Several areas of research and networking need to be pursued to continue to resolve this situation to a more satisfactory level. These changes would include:

1. Communication departments need access to accreditation opportunities based on the quality of public relations programs not whether tied to journalism or mass communication programs.

The archaic criteria of "unit rule" must be abolished. The standards should be more closely tied to the AEJMC-PRSA 1987 Commission standards until a more careful study of standards can be made for public relations.

Furthermore, since a few communications departments have been accredited, ACEJMC must officially acknowledge this situation (at the 1989 national meeting the board was unaware that communication departments had been accredited). One example is East Tennessee State University's undergraduate program in the Department of Communication which, of course, qualifies because the public relations option has also a mass communication option and a journalism option. The accreditors just ignore the communication option.

2. In this age of interdisciplinary departments, there is more and more opportunity for blending curriculums and the line between communication and journalism and/or mass communications is becoming quite blurred. So the question is beyond the issue of whether communication departments can be accredited. It is the unit rule which needs to be redefined. Public relations should not be tied to just journalism and/or mass communication programs. As mentioned earlier, journalism is no longer the crucial base for preparing future public relations professionals. The public relations program should be tied to the curriculum which would produce the best professionals possible and in many cases that would mean less journalism and more communication type courses, particularly communication management courses. The unit rule is basically a diservice to the profession at this point.

3. Since ACEJMC already accredits communication departments, the Council should be renamed. The respondents suggested several possibilities and these should be pursued immediately:

-Accreditation Council for Educators in Communication-2 mentions
-Council on Applied Media Programs
-ACE Communication-2 mentions
-Accrediting Council for Educators in Public Relations, Journalism, and Mass Communication
-Accrediting Council for Educators in Journalism and Communication-2 mentions
-Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Communication

-Accrediting Council for Communication Education
-Educators in Public Relations

The titles suggest several emphases. Some drop journalism entirely. Others reduce everything to communication. Some focus entirely on public relations. Perhaps the accrediting body should look at the full gamut of possibilities. If journalism, mass communication, and public relations are now accredited--why not accredit communication programs. It is the only piece not included presently. The entire issue needs to be explored more fully.

4. Public relations professionals, especially academics, should continue to pursue the idea of accreditation from the more academic associations. In the 1987 survey Hamilton surveyed a variety of possibilities:

Q6 Would you support a certification procedures that used the Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education's guidelines as certification standards? (the PRSA certification approach)

Yes: 43.4% No. 16.67% Not sure 36.7%

Q8. Would you be interested in any/or all of the following plans?

Q8.1 PRIG should approach ACEJMC to work toward including PR programs currently not eligible for certification in their certification procedures.
(Results: ACEJMC stated any program could apply--however, the "unit rule" still technically excludes almost all communication programs.)

Yes 62.1% No. 17.2% Not sure: 20.7%

Q8.2 PRIG should explore the establishment of its own certification procedures.

Yes 34.5% No. 17.2% Not sure 48.3%

Q8.3 PRIG should approach the SCA PR Interest Group to explore certification of non-journalism PR programs.

Yes: 48.3% No. 20.7% Not sure 31.0%

By the 1990 survey respondents had the following opinions:

Q7.8 Which procedures would your departments be more interested in?

Acejmc's accreditation	37.0%
PRSA'S accreditation	30.0%*
Both	04.0%
Neither	04.0%
Not Sure	04.0%

*Only because of PRSSA chapter

Q7.9 Would your department be interested in SCA-CPR (Commission on Public Relations) applying for the national accreditation designation?

Yes	37.0%
No	44.0%*
Unclear	04.0%
Blank	04.0%
Other	04.0%**

*We should be part of accreditation granting not receiving
**Possibly need information

Q7.10 If YES: Would you prefer that:

SCA-CPR be one of two national accrediting bodies	22.2%
SCA-CPR be the sole national accrediting body	00.0%
Blank	59.0%
Other	04.0%*

*Let's establish 1 joint council. There is already too much proliferation.
*Why not think in terms of PRIG-ICA accreditation, one that would focus primarily on scholarly aspects of PR programs, not on their professional applicability or administrative servitude.

Although a specific question on ICA-PRIG establishing an accrediting program was not asked in the 1987 survey, there may be much merit for SCA-CPR and ICA-PRIG to work together. Especially since the two surveys by the ICA-PRIG Task Force establish a growing interest in program accreditation by academics outside of ACEJMC and PRSA.

REFERENCES

Cable, Richard and Vibbert, Steven, Public Relations as Communication Management, (Edina, Minnesota: Bellwether Press, first edition 1986), pps. 100-101.

Gibson, Dirk C. "Public Relations Education in a Time of Change: Suggestions for Academic Relocation and Renovation," Public Relations Quarterly, Fall 1987, pps. 25-31.

Hamilton, Pete, "Report of Membership Survey: Issues in Program Accreditation and Certification," report presented to annual business meeting of the Public Relations Interest Group (PRIG), International Communication Association, Montreal, Canada, 1987.

Joint Commission of the Public Relations Society of America and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, (1987), Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education.

Lenn, Marjorie Peace. letter from the Director of Professional Services to ACEJMC in response to petition of ICA-PRIG Task Force on Accreditation for opening accreditation to communication departments, September 11, 1989.

Neff, Bonita Dostal. "Accreditation Survey," report presented to annual business meeting for the Public Relations Interest Group (PRIG), International Communication Association, Dublin, Ireland, 1990.

Neff, Bonita Dostal. "Public Relations Pedagogy: An Emerging Communication Theory Perspective," Vincent Hazleton and Carl Botan (Eds), Public Relations Theory, New Jersey: Erlbaum Press, Fall 1989, pps. 159-172.

FOOTNOTE

Communication departments have been historically tied to "speech." Now these professional and academic communication organizations have dropped "speech" and appear as Central States Communication Association, International Communication Association, Southern State Communication Association, Eastern Communication Association. Only the Speech Communication Association narrowly defeated the renaming proposition and it is expected to evolve to communication on the next ballot to the American Communication Association.

ACEJMC's national board meeting and in written records presented kept referring to communication departments as "speech" departments. The confusion in the discussions was apparent. In fact, when told that most departments are no longer communication departments, the board simply did not know how to address this change.